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Article (Accepted Version)

Leczmar, Matthew (2019) Intellectual interventions: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the ethics of texture and messiness. *Wasafiri*, 34 (1). pp. 38-45. ISSN 0269-0055

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## Intellectual Interventions: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the Ethics of Texture and Messiness

Matthew Leczmar

In June 2018, the acclaimed author and public intellectual Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was awarded the PEN Pinter Prize (Trevarthen np). The prize, named after playwright Harold Pinter, is bestowed annually on a writer from a country in the Commonwealth who ‘casts an “unflinching, unswerving” gaze upon the world, and who shows a “fierce intellectual determination [...] to define the real truth of our lives and our societies”’ (Trevarthen np). These criteria derive from Pinter’s 2005 Nobel lecture, and their characteristics are clearly reflected in the comments given by Maureen Freely, the Chair of Judges of the 2018 PEN Pinter prize, to mark Adichie’s award:

In her gorgeous fictions, but just as much in her TED talks and essays, she refuses to be deterred or detained by the categories of others. Sophisticated beyond measure in her understanding of gender, race, and global inequality, she guides us through the revolving doors of identity politics, liberating us all. (qtd. in Trevarthen np)

As Freely notes, Adichie’s eloquence and intellectual conviction are beyond doubt. Her influence has been powerfully illustrated by the popularity of her fiction – most notably the novels *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and *Americanah* (2013) – as well as her public talk ‘The Dangers of a Single Story’ (2009) and her nonfiction publications *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014) and *Dear Ijeawele: A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (2017).<sup>1</sup> While Adichie’s writerly credentials are clear, more intriguing is the way Freely draws attention to the rebellious streak in Adichie’s public statements. Crucially, her assertion that

Adichie refuses to be detained by the categories of others reflects the writer's oft-repeated conviction that people – and young women in particular – should not care about making themselves likeable in order to suit others' expectations (*We Should All Be Feminists* 24 and *Dear Ijeawele* 36). This rejection of likeability, which Adichie argues has a disastrous impact on women's lives, has had a crucial bearing on the content and reception of her wider public intellectual work. Indeed, Adichie's interventions have been increasingly mired in controversy, with comments relating to postcolonial theory and the gender identity of trans women provoking condemnation from various quarters.

Revisiting some of the debates that have erupted in response to Adichie's recent public intellectual work, this essay aims to offer new insights into the content and reception of her interventions. As Sisonke Msimang argues, while Adichie has become a global icon of black women's thought and literature, her remarkable status has also given her a platform to speak on behalf of groups and experiences that she cannot fully know or understand (Msimang np). While Msimang powerfully conveys the dangers facing prominent black female intellectuals in their work, Adichie's interventions nevertheless offer vital contributions to a variety of urgent debates despite these risks. Indeed, although Richard A. Posner argues that the significance of public intellectuals in the United States is in the decline (6), Adichie – who lives between Nigeria and the US – is helping to revitalise this role. By offering a bold vision of political engagement that purposefully engages with international audiences via digital and multimedia platforms, her interventions have arguably helped to re-vivify public debate about a host of complex issues.

Although praise and criticism have been heaped upon Adichie in response to her public statements, little work has been done to draw out the nuances of these mixed reviews. Moreover, there is a tendency for critics to read Adichie's fictional works as overly determined by her political views and remarks. For instance, Ernest M. Emenyonu asserts

that the political ideologies driving the writer's fiction are largely distilled in her talks 'The Danger of a Single Story' and 'We Should All Be Feminists' (2). However, her creative writing has been just as important in developing her ideological positions as her TED talks. The overlapping terrain of her fictional and intellectual endeavours does not only engage with political concerns, but instead represents an imaginative, emotional and collaborative effort towards more ethical forms of understanding and cohabitation.

Adichie's intellectual engagement with notions of texture and messiness is shown in the interview she gave with the journalist Caroline Broué during the 2018 'Night of Ideas' ('La Nuit de Idées') festival. Near the beginning of that discussion, Adichie responded to a question about the compatibility of creative writing and political work by asserting that while she likes having the platform, she does not consider herself an activist: 'I am a storyteller, I'm a person who watches the world; I am a person who is interested in the tiny details and the textures of lives' (Adichie, 'Official Launch' np).<sup>2</sup> However, Adichie's repeated use of the term 'texture' in the interview and in her wider public work suggests that her conception of storytelling is grounded in political as well as ethical modes of thought and action.

On one level, texture refers to all the effects produced when different material surfaces, bodies, media and ideas rub up against each other. Such a view is reflected in the work of the academic Amber Jamilla Musser, who argues that texture – and particularly the texture of black women's hair – is an expression of difference that can have both physical and political effects (Musser 13). Unpacking Adichie's contribution to the 'Night of Ideas' interview and some of her other statements and writings, it can be argued that her intellectual interventions engage with texture not just in terms of their content or message, but also through their circulation and adaptation across multiple media forms and geographical spaces. And yet, the sheer mobility of Adichie's interventions also raises an important ethical concern.

In Judith Butler's philosophy, ethical obligations between, and for, people emerge both at a distance and in proximity in a globalised world, raising questions about the feasibility of ethical responsiveness when those that suffer seem far away (Butler 134). Given Adichie's highly mediated public statements, her interventions foreground the precarious but also deeply connected and therefore textured nature of human coexistence. The theorist Edward Said advances a similar argument in relation to the work of public intellectuals. Although most famous for his foundational studies of the impact of European colonialism on the development of forms of cultural expression across the globe, Said is also well-known for advocating that writers should intervene in public debates. He argues that since the turn of the twenty-first century, creative writers have increasingly taken on the role previously fulfilled by academic intellectuals: to be witnesses to persecution and suffering, to speak truth to power and to supply dissenting voices (Said 27). Given the controversies that have attended some of Adichie's intellectual interventions in recent years, Said's insistence that writer-public intellectuals must be intransigent as well as enlightening is highly suggestive.

Adichie's engagements with the ethics of texture are also working to reimagine the terrain of public intellectual work. As Adichie has been adept at using multimedia forms to disseminate her messages internationally, she has also taken advantage of the highly interactive nature of contemporary political debate, using the debates provoked by her interventions to advance her writerly as well public intellectual credentials. However, such a level of exposure has also left Adichie highly vulnerable to censure, highlighting the risks faced by public intellectuals when they wade so openly into controversial debates. While some of her statements have come in for strong criticism, she has also been honest about her flaws, demonstrating that the messiness of public work also provides an opportunity for collaborative revision and change. Fostering a space where the textures of human experience

can be collaboratively scrutinised by diverse audiences, Adichie not only shows the courage of her convictions but also the continuing ethical necessity of public intellectual work.

### **Framing Responses to Adichie's Intellectual Interventions**

Returning to the 'Night of Ideas' interview, the most widely quoted part of the exchange - which was broadcast live on social media and can still be viewed online - was a moment described by Ainehi Edoro as 'the greatest clapback in the history of Adichie clapbacks' (np). The clapback in question was a response by Adichie to a query from Broué about whether there are bookshops in Nigeria, which the journalist asked as part of a broader remark about French people's negative perceptions of the country ('Official Launch' np). Visibly irked by the subtext of Broué's question, Adichie offered a sharp rebuttal: 'I think it reflects very poorly on the French people that you have to ask me that kind of question' ('Official Launch' np). Although this moment has been widely praised for highlighting the way misrepresentation and ignorance continue to influence attitudes about Nigeria in the Global North, another exchange produced a different kind of reaction.

Replying to an audience member's enquiry about the significance of race in her work and her broader thoughts about postcolonial theory, Adichie retorted that she did not know what the latter term meant, rounding off her answer with a tongue-in-cheek barb: 'I think it's something that professors made up because they needed to get jobs' ('Official Launch' np). This comment catalysed another round of strong responses by commentators, with some accusing Adichie of indulging in a dangerous form of anti-intellectualism that risks erasing the very tradition of postcolonial resistance her writing is itself indebted to. The academic Grace Musila articulates this concern in a comment piece for *Al Jazeera*. While Musila notes her gratitude for the interview for the way it 'demystifies postcolonial theory' (Musila np), Musila goes on to offer a forceful critique of Adichie's dismissive attitudes towards

postcolonialism. Observing that all postcolonial artists have to deal with the ‘burden of representation’ (Musila np) placed upon them as spokespeople of formerly colonised places, she ultimately contends that ‘[u]nder this pressure, there is little room for decontextualised humor. The risks of erasure of entire intellectual histories and hard-earned victories are real’ (np). Such sentiments were echoed by Shailja Patel in a series of tweets published after the interview. As Patel writes:

When you’re a global thought leader whose every eminently quotable clapback makes headlines, but you erase whole bodies of African knowledge and African feminism outside your field, what Africa are you defending? A market? A brand? (np)<sup>3</sup>

Musila’s and Patel’s responses draw attention not only to the potential contradictions in Adichie’s remarks about postcolonial theory, but also gesture to some of the broader concerns that have attended the author’s public intellectual work. As Patel notes, Adichie’s public talks and nonfiction writings have become hugely marketable around the world, and the ‘Adichie brand’ has to a large extent been built on the writer’s ability to position herself as a distinctly Nigerian and African creative thinker who also exudes global vision and appeal.

Moving beyond the ‘Night of Ideas’ interview, arguably the most strident criticism to be levelled against Adichie has been in reaction to comments she has made about transgender women. In an interview with Channel 4 News in 2017, Adichie drew a distinction between the experiences of trans women and cis women on the grounds that

if you’ve lived in the world as a man, with the privileges that the world accords to men and then [...] switch gender, it’s difficult for me to accept that then we can equate your experience with the experience of a woman who has lived from the beginning in the world as a woman. (qtd. in Fischer 896)

Citing the responses of trans women and other commentators to this statement, Mia Fischer argues that Adichie’s claims ‘erase a multitude of trans experiences and fails to account for

the complex workings of gender, specifically the violent realities of transmisogyny' (Fischer 897). Fischer also quotes from a comment posted on Facebook by Ola Osaze, which is addressed directly to Adichie and further clarifies the significance of this controversy. Part of Osaze's statement reads:

Given your popularity, power and influence, you [s]hould be deeply concerned about the weight of your words and the impact it will have on the lives of trans and gender nonconforming people[.] (qtd. in Fischer 898).

Osaze's comment highlights a concern that hangs over Adichie's public declarations. As her literary celebrity has reached remarkable heights in recent years, so have her statements become increasingly freighted with expectations about their specific political content and impact. And yet, while the critiques propounded by Musila, Patel, Fischer and others shed crucial light on Adichie's public interventions, little work has been done to consider how these controversial moments might form part of a broader and textured intellectual mosaic.

### **Talking Texture in the 'Night of Ideas' Interview**

To locate Adichie's engagement with ethics in her public intellectual work, it is first necessary to consider how the writer defines and explores the idea of texture in the 'Night of Ideas' interview. As already noted, Adichie pushes back against the idea that she is a political activist in the interview, affirming instead that her primary calling is as a storyteller, which means she is 'a person who is interested in the tiny details and the textures of lives' ('Official Launch' np). The writer goes on to give a more detailed account of her own idea of texture in the 'Night of Ideas' interview:

I think really what it means to be human is to be complex, and also to sometimes be contradictory. [...] It is possible in fact for somebody to have contradictory views, it's possible for your life not to match your ideology, for example, and it's only through storytelling that we can bring that out. ('Official Launch' np)



In this excerpt, Adichie demonstrates an understanding of the multi-layered workings of the human psyche, emphasising that a person can hold a variety of conflicting views at any one time. This resonates with Amber Jamilla Musser's own exploration of the physical as well as political significance of texture:

Something becomes textured because it is different from its surroundings; further, it bears the mark of that difference in a way that can be understood through various somatic forms of knowledge. (13)

In this formulation, texture represents an expression of multiple forms and conceptions of difference, which can be manifested in bodily, emotional or environmental terms. Returning to Adichie's remarks in her 'Night of Ideas' interview, texture should therefore be viewed as an expression of the contradictory and differential aspect of people's beliefs, which are affected by emotional as well as political and cultural aspects of social existence.

It is important to underscore, however, that Adichie not only theorises the complex nature of political thinking in the 'Night of Ideas' interview, but also goes on to enact this complexity for her audiences – those in the room and those watching online – with her contradictory remark about postcolonial theory. As Musila asserts, even though 'Adichie overlooks the feminist and postcolonial theorists who made her possible[, t]hey are [nevertheless] part of her lineage' (Musila np). Thus, and despite her claims to the contrary, Adichie's intellectual interventions arguably embody the kind of activism that Kyle Bunds asserts must 'traverse the messiness of [...] *doing something*' (238, original italics). By performing as well as hypothesising this messy activity before a range of different audiences, Adichie's words exemplify the textured complexity of political work.

The author returns to the idea of texture later in the discussion as a way of responding to a question about Donald Trump's presidency. She remarks:

America has become home [for me] and it makes me sad because I see that there are real consequences to this President. [...] The texture of human relationships I think has changed [...], that people are more likely to be racist, [...] to show racism, to show prejudice [...] and to dismiss misogyny and sexism. (Adichie, 'Official Launch' np)

Here, texture expresses the tissue of encounters, customs and preconceptions that make up a society. Focusing on the way this tarnished texture has negatively impacted on efforts to improve racial and gender equality in America, Adichie's argument bolsters her credentials as a transatlantic writer and intellectual capable of speaking to multiple contexts. Indeed, Adichie's concern with foregrounding the international dimension of her professional as well as personal life, which is part of the texture of her own experiences and perspectives, feeds into another key vocabulary that she draws from in the interview — the politics of black hair.

This issue has been crucial in the development of Adichie's international celebrity, especially since the release of her third novel *Americanah*. In the 'Night of Ideas' interview, Adichie reaffirms her conviction that natural black hair is political by noting that because it 'grows up' ('Official Launch'), it does not fit 'the mainstream idea of [...] beauty, [which] is that women's hair, long hair, means something that falls down' ('Global Launch' np). This restrictive conception of beauty, she adds, puts 'pressure [on] black women to conform' ('Global Launch' np). Adichie not only draws her audience's attention to this oppressive norm through her words but also through her physical appearance. By proudly wearing her hair in natural styles, the writer has made herself into a visual beacon of resistance against the mainstream preference for straightened hair.

Musser explores the distinctive political power of black hair in her article, arguing that

this texture, or feeling, of black female difference is located in a set of overlapping imaginaries — that unstraightened hair offers political resistance and the insistence that black naturalness is a source of power. (Musser 2)

Crucial to Musser's formulation of a mode of black female resistance grounded in hair politics is the entanglement of different imaginaries and meanings that underpins it. Such a conception of political power also helps to illuminate the textured forms that Adichie's interventions have taken. Indeed, her rise to political prominence has in large part been due to her 'ability to [...] transpose her politics and image across and between different media' (Leczna 168). This transformative process is exemplified by the multimedia adaptation of her TED talk 'We Should All Be Feminists'. The recorded speech has been published online and in print and quotes from the talk have also been featured on a pop track by Beyoncé and stitched into the fabric of a t-shirt by the fashion house Dior (Leczna 167). By circulating her views and visage through a variety of material and audio-visual digital platforms, the textures of her argument about natural black hair have gained force and mobility as they have been shared around the world. Indeed, it is the very accessible nature of Adichie's political interventions that has helped them to generate such powerful responses and robust discussions.

Adichie's multimedia engagements with the idea of texture becomes powerfully re-articulated in the question and answer session that followed the 'Night of Ideas' interview. Asked whether she thinks literature is powerful, Adichie responded with this illuminating anecdote:

I went to a store [in Nigeria] and there was a woman there with her daughter [...] and [...] she said to me 'look at my daughter's hair' [...]. And she said, 'I read your manifesto and I used to spend my Saturdays with her in the salon to make sure her hair was super neat and super tight', and she was like, 'we don't do it anymore. Instead on Saturdays we go and do fun things, but look her hair's not very "neat" and "tidy", but we're happy.' [...] And so for me that was a tiny moment where I looked at the girl's hair, which indeed was [...] 'interesting looking', [...] and I thought this is [...] wonderful. ('Official Launch' np)

The relative messiness of the girl's new hairstyle not only illustrates the power of literature to change people's attitudes, but also reinforces the concern shown by Adichie throughout the interview for trying to deepen understanding of the textures of people's appearances, histories and relations. The fact that the woman in the anecdote cites Adichie's most recent publication, *Dear Ijeawele*, as the source of this transformation – a book that started life as a Facebook post and is an elaboration of her earlier text *We Should All Be Feminists* – bolsters the argument that the multimedia evolution of her interventions has been a crucial factor in her rise to public intellectual prominence and her evolving preoccupation with ideas of texture. Indeed, Adichie demonstrates a sharp awareness of the ways her feminist writings have been disseminated and received in the interview, which suggests that her interventions are deliberately designed to provoke strong reactions in her readers and followers.

Anticipating this kind of interpretation, Said asserts that public intellectuals need to be adaptable and creative in the ways they convey their messages. Such an approach, he argues, 'enables intellectual performances on many fronts, in many places, many styles, that keep in play both the sense of opposition and the sense of engaged participation' (Said 34). Adichie's contributions to the 'Night of Ideas' launch and other public events arguably embody this performative aspect. They stage dynamic and sometimes contentious forms of responsiveness to and with her audiences in various creative ways. It is precisely because Adichie navigates the messiness of action in her public work that her engagements have made such a tangible impact on political debates around the world.

### **Precarity, Responsibility, Risk: Ethical Textures in Adichie's Public Engagements**

The ethical impulse in Adichie's intellectual interventions is highlighted by her exploration of the humanising power of texture during the 'Night of Ideas' interview. Relating this subject to the issue of governmental policy, she notes it is

one thing to talk about politics and to talk about policy, but it's quite another when you humanise it. When you humanise something by telling a story, it's so much easier for another human being to make a connection. (Adichie, 'Official Launch' np)

Adichie's assertion that human stories of people's experiences can lead to better governance resonates with sentiments she conveyed during a conversation with the publisher Ellah Allfrey in 2013. Agreeing with Allfrey's observation that fiction allows for truth that is deeper than mere fact, Adichie further asserted that storytelling allows her to be 'radically honest' ('Humanising History' np). In the years since this interview, the writer has become increasingly concerned with advocating truthfulness and honesty through her public engagements – notably in her 'Class Day Address' given at Harvard University in May 2018 – which she argues are needed to counter the pernicious spread of lies in American politics. Given this long-time preoccupation, it is easy to see why Adichie would return to the idea of honest and humane representation in her 'Night of Ideas' interview. And yet, Adichie's interest in notions of texture and truthfulness reflects a deeper ethical concern with foregrounding the potential of messiness to demonstrate the complexities of human experience.

Elaborating on this point in the interview, she refers to the current 'discourse on refugees' (Adichie, 'Official Launch' np) in Europe, which she thinks is 'so dehumanising' ('Official Launch' np). She adds that

if we decided to include the stories of their lives into the policies we make about them, I think the policies would be very different, because then we would be forced to confront the fact that we are them, that it's only an accident of birth that separates us from being those people who are seeking better lives. (Adichie, 'Official Launch' np)

To understand the deeper significances of this ethical core in Adichie's public interventions, Judith Butler's work on precarity and ethics offers a useful access point. Addressing the problem of ethical obligation in a globalised world, Butler contends that 'the ethical demands that emerge through the global circuits in these times depend on th[e] limited but necessary reversibility of proximity and distance' (137). Arguing that certain ethical demands impinge upon us even when we are not close to those that suffer, Butler lays a blueprint for an ethics that can respond to the specific dynamics of a hyperconnected world. Focusing her ethical formulation on the issue of precarity, which 'exposes our sociality, the fragile and necessary dimensions of our interdependency' (Butler 148), Butler goes on to assert that 'we cannot understand cohabitation without understanding that a generalized precarity obligates us to oppose genocide and to sustain life on egalitarian terms' (148). This is a vision of ethics that resonates with Edward Said's own account of the public role of the writer-intellectual. For Said, a vital aspect of the intellectual's work is to 'construct fields of coexistence rather than fields of battle as the outcome of intellectual labor' (35). This underpins his related assertion that '[p]eace cannot exist without equality' (35). The work of the public intellectual can therefore be viewed as supporting the struggle towards more ethical modes of human cohabitation that Butler views as both necessary and precarious.

Returning to the question of Adichie's intellectual interventions, the ideas outlined by Butler and Said offer a way of drawing out the ethical concern woven into the writer's contribution to the 'Night of Ideas' interview and her broader public work. When Adichie calls for socio-political understanding and action to be grounded in the textured reality of human experiences and relations, she also makes an ethical appeal to her international audiences to feel their connectedness to precarious peoples and situations even if they are not affected by them directly. As she states in a speech given at Chatham House in 2018, through reading 'we become alive in bodies not our own' and 'embrace empathy' (Adichie, 'London

Conference 2018' np), which helps us to learn that in spite of our differences, 'what we have in common is that humanity' ('London Conference 2018' np). While these quotations represent a profound defence of the ethical potential of the narrative form and of reading, it is crucial that Adichie chooses to present her argument in person rather than in print, anticipating as well as reinforcing the global dissemination of her image and words through social media platforms. As Butler notes, ethical relations are always highly mediated in this digital age (138). This point underscores the power of media technologies, which have the capacity to transport representations of vulnerable peoples around the globe and thus bring such persons into ethical proximity with their international onlookers.

And yet, Butler also argues that this ethical formulation 'dead-ends [...] in the problem of corporeal locatedness, since no matter how fully transported through media we might be, we are also emphatically not' (137). Butler determines that a model of global ethics will always partially short-circuit due to the 'corporeal locatedness' (137) and un-transportability of fleshy bodies. Indeed, this ethical impasse appears to be born out in the mixed reception of Adichie's intellectual interventions. For as the writer has been criticised for claiming the authority to speak for identity groups not her own and for dismissing traditions of struggle against physical as well as epistemic forms of violence, she has arguably fallen foul of the reality of her own locatedness — of the impossibility of ever fully translating her own experience into others' and vice versa. However, and despite this limitation, the ethical impasse expressed by Adichie's public intellectual endeavours doesn't render them futile.

The fact that Adichie's interventions are so widely accessible to audiences around the world demonstrates that she is prepared to risk the loss of her popularity in order to disseminate her political principles and to provoke responses from her audiences. Indeed, by performing the very rejection of likeability that she encourages other women to undertake, her public statements surely reflect Said's belief that one of the major responsibilities of the

public intellectual is to resist political pressure and criticism; to go against the grain of popular opinion and make themselves vulnerable despite the dangers. As '[w]e [all] struggle in, from, and against precarity' (Butler 150) by undertaking such work, it is critical that Adichie has also made herself open and vulnerable to criticism through her public intellectual labours. While it would be problematic to equate the risks Adichie runs as a privileged writer and the acute struggles faced by peoples whose lives are disproportionately precarious, nevertheless she has shown courage in continually presenting her beliefs in an accessible way even though this stance has arguably tarnished her reputation. Indeed, although Butler and Said have offered seminal interventions in their respective fields, they have never gained the kind of popular appeal that Adichie's statements have achieved. Prioritising accessibility over theoretical complexity, the writer's intellectual interventions are significant for the way they seek to democratise discussions of politics and ethics and ground these ideas in the textures of lived experience.

### **Messiness in Adichie's Literary Activism**

In Adichie's second novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, which refashions the history and literary legacies of the Nigeria-Biafra war (1967–70), questions of the ethics of humanitarian intervention and the mediatisation of conflict are pondered at length. During one passage, the novel's narrative voice portrays two American journalists as they are escorted around a refugee camp in Biafra. Following this scene, which foregrounds the way propaganda was used by both sides during the conflict, Adichie inserts a poem that evokes the textures of the ethical dilemmas invoked by the war. The verse, which bears the accusatory title 'Were You Silent When We Died?', begins by posing another question: '*Did you see photos in sixty-eight/Of children with their hair becoming rust[?]*' (*Half of a Yellow Sun* 375, italics in



original). Demanding that the reader accounts for their own ethical proximity to the victims of the Biafran war, the poetic persona goes on to proclaim:

*You needn't imagine. There were photos  
Displayed in gloss-filled pages of your Life.  
Did you see? Did you feel sorry briefly.  
Then turn round to hold your lover or wife?*

*Their skin had turned the tawny of weak tea  
And showed cobwebs of vein and brittle bone;  
Naked children laughing, as if the man  
Would not take photos and then leave, alone.* (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 375, italics in original)

In this verse, meticulous attention is paid to the materiality of the children's perilous lives, which works to bridge the ethical as well as the emotional gulf that media representations often instantiate between the realities of lived experience and the blinkered perceptions held and disseminated by international bystanders. The poem also foregrounds the multimedia technologies and ethical dilemmas involved in such processes of global witnessing. As Butler affirms

it is only when we understand that what happens there also happens here, and that "here" is already an elsewhere [...] that we stand a chance of grasping the difficult and shifting global connections in ways that let us know the transport and the constraint of what we might still call ethics. (150)

The poem in *Half of a Yellow Sun* figures the 'difficult and shifting connections' (Butler 150) that Butler highlights. Indeed, as with many of Adichie's intellectual interventions, it calls for those who are implicated in such struggles to take responsibility for drawing out the textures that can lead to more ethical forms of action.

Such a sentiment is also expressed in Adichie's acclaimed TED talk 'The Danger of a Single Story' (2009). During the presentation, she declares that '[t]he single story [of a place or people] creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete' ('The Danger' np). Here she locates a complex mechanism within storytelling that has important ramifications for its political and ethical effects. As the controversies surrounding some of her own statements have revealed, stories – in both fictional and nonfictional forms – represent an expression of power that can 'be[...] used to dispossess and to malign' (Adichie, 'The Danger' np). And yet, despite this implicit admission of culpability, Adichie also insists that stories can empower and humanise if they are used to offer an array of perspectives on a place or people ('The Danger' np). Arguing that storytelling should be a pluralistic rather than singular endeavour, the TED talk shows Adichie engaging with the ethical potential of texture long before the 'Night of Ideas' interview. Returning to the poetic verse quoted from *Half of a Yellow Sun*, by attempting to recover the human texture that is so often lost in portrayals of humanitarian crises, it demonstrates that such concerns course through Adichie's fiction as well as her public intellectual work.

It is crucial to reaffirm, however, that despite the laudable aims of Adichie's ethical project, her reputation has also been tarnished by accusations of ignorance and prejudice. These negative consequences are clearly illustrated by the criticism that has attended Adichie's problematic statements about postcolonial theory and trans women, with the latter provoking Fischer to accuse popular feminism in general of being 'complicit in the replication of the very systems of violence and oppression that we set out to dismantle' (898). Adichie tried to clarify her comments in a subsequent Facebook post, which asserts her continuing commitment to 'the rights of transgender people' ('CLARIFYING' np) and makes another appeal to texture, reiterating that 'to be human is to be a complex amalgam of your

experiences' ('CLARIFYING' np). However, Adichie's attempt to clear up the controversy did not satisfy all her critics. Fischer, for one, admonishes her for continually failing to 'defer to the perspectives and experiences of trans women when asked about them' (898). Summing up this position, Fischer argues:

When single figures become elevated as spokespeople, the privilege and responsibility of such a position should entail an acknowledgement that one cannot possibly speak to and for all lived experiences. (898)

While Adichie does acknowledge that there are 'individual differences' ('CLARIFYING' np) that complicate accounts of group identities and experiences, she ultimately reiterates her earlier claim that trans women are not the same as 'women born female' ('CLARIFYING' np) because they have benefitted from a degree of male privilege. Given that the writer chooses to reassert rather than challenge her generalist assertion about trans women, Fischer's criticism is a legitimate one. And yet, an alternative response might be to highlight the way Adichie has consistently compelled her audiences to be ethically receptive and to feel the textures and messiness that complicate their understanding of such issues even as she has sometimes failed to embody this ethos herself.

Adichie makes this very point in her Chatham House speech by affirming that

we humans are flawed [...], but even while flawed we are capable of [...] doing [and] being better. We do not need first to be perfect before we can do what is right and just. (Adichie, 'London Conference 2018' np)

Adichie views flaws as a necessary jumping off point for ethical intervention, and her broader public engagements should therefore be viewed as an effort to foster such a conscientious stance. A vital vein of self-criticism runs through many of her intellectual endeavours, which may be read as a faltering but reflective labouring towards more adaptable and textured forms

of ethical being. It is because these messy efforts have been undertaken in a public and open manner that such robust discussions of Adichie's remarks have been able to develop. In seeking to provoke such textured responses, her interventions have helped to complicate and sharpen her audiences' understanding of urgent issues.

## **Conclusion**

Returning to Musila's critique of Adichie's dismissal of postcolonial theory during the 'Night of Ideas' interview, the academic rightly highlights the 'burden of representation' (Musila np) that Adichie has to negotiate in her writing and public engagements. However, Adichie also confronts the risks, textures and messiness involved in representation through these interventions. Such a configuration highlights the serious difficulties facing public intellectuals, who are liable to misrepresent and malign even as they struggle to imagine alternative ways of being with others. A courageous ethical imperative can be discerned in the way Adichie traces out the contours of this fraught ground — a move that should be viewed as an imperfect but vital space-clearing gesture. Although Musila, Fischer, Patel and others have shed light on some of the problematic aspects of Adichie's public interventions, the potential underpinning these contentious remarks also needs to be considered.

Adichie's multimedia engagements help forge a space where urgent issues can be interrogated and disseminated widely, and where an ethical embrace of texture and messiness can be enacted as well as shared. Embodying the role of the intransigent but also courageous literary activist — one who allows the contradictoriness of life to propel and nuance her storytelling rather than delimit it — her intellectual interventions, in all their varied shades, represent a vital resource and provocation for those struggling to live ethically in this globalised and precarious age.

## **Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> According to the TED website, the video recording of ‘The Danger of a Single Story’ has been viewed more than 16 million times as of 25 October 2018. *We Should All Be Feminists* also started life as a TED talk, which Adichie presented in December 2012. It has been viewed almost two million times as of 25 October 2018.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations from the ‘Official Launch’ interview reproduced in the essay are from my own transcription.

<sup>3</sup> Shailja Patel has kindly given permission for me to reproduce this tweet in the essay.

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